

Fingerpicking/Fingerstyle: A Musicological Uncovering of a Neglected Guitar Technique

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Fingerpicking – or the synonymously used term ‘fingerstyle’ – is a way of playing the guitar that developed in the USA around 1900 and that imitates the piano ragtime. To date, there are hardly any systematic accounts of either the history or the instrumental realization of fingerpicking. This absence of research on the topic is contrasted by a wealth of teaching material on fingerpicking, ranging from arranged classical pieces to popular guitar accompaniment. It is possible that the umbrella term ‘fingerpicking’ is a selling point when it comes to teaching material; however, the term is usually attributed without serious attention to the historical tradition of fingerpicking. This is one of the reasons for why it is desirable to conduct detailed research on the history and characteristics of this technique, which should lead to increasing the technical and artistic understanding of it among musicians.

In addition to a discussion of terminology and definitions, my paper will show when, where, how, and why fingerpicking came into being and where its musical roots are. Portraits of influential fingerpicking musicians provide the historical framework for this talk; furthermore, they serve to show regional differences in the practical uses of the technique. By looking at both theory and practice, I will elaborate on the genres in which fingerpicking is used and where it stands in relation to improvisation. Interviews with renowned national (i.e., Austrian) and international fingerpickers serve to illuminate the contemporary practice of fingerpicking as well as its history and its future from the viewpoint of practitioners.

My aim is to show that, fundamentally, fingerpicking is not regular guitar accompaniment as it is understood in popular music; rather, it is a sophisticated and often virtuoso guitar technique that spans many musical genres and styles. This paper strives to raise awareness of fingerpicking as a promising research field and to inspire musicologists to continue research in this field.